



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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Fact Sheet

HISTORY OF THE ICE INVESTIGATION INTO COLOMBIA'S CALI DRUG CARTEL AND THE RODRIGUEZ-OREJUELA BROTHERS

SUMMARY

To date, ICE agents have devoted more than 91,855 case hours to this 13-year investigation. Their efforts have led to the conviction and jailing of more than 100 members of Colombia's Cali drug cartel, including cartel founders Miguel and Gilberto Rodriguez-Orejuela, who pleaded guilty to Colombian charges and were jailed in Colombia, as well as many cell managers and lawyers convicted in U.S. trials. In addition, more than 47,000 kilograms (more than 50 tons) of cocaine and \$15 million have been seized as part of the case.

- **1991** -- The ICE (then-U.S. Customs Service) investigation into the Cali drug cartel began when a drug-sniffing dog at the Miami seaport alerted to a shipment of cocaine concealed in concrete posts, resulting in a three-month surveillance and several "controlled deliveries" in Miami and Texas. ICE agents executed 7 search warrants, resulting in the seizure of 12,000 kilograms of cocaine and the arrest of several individuals. One defendant cooperated and made recorded consensual calls to Miguel Rodriguez-Orejuela in Colombia. During the conversations, Miguel Rodriguez admitted ownership of the cocaine load. Miguel Rodriguez later dispatched attorneys who successfully convinced the defendant that it would not be in his interest to cooperate with authorities. No further leads were discovered in the searches except for a list of coded phone numbers and names of people in the United States and Colombia. Eventually, ICE agents broke the telephone codes, leading them to identify Harold Ackerman as the coordinator for all Cali cartel operations in the United States.
- **1992** -- In March and April of 1992, ICE conducted a Title III wire intercept on Harold Ackerman's principal cell phone. The first intercepted call discussed a seven-ton cocaine shipment that had arrived two days earlier in the United States. This call revealed that the Cali cartel was using broccoli as a cover over cocaine loads. Ultimately, the Title III intercept resulted in the arrest of Ackerman along with 7 other individuals and the seizure of more than 6,000 kilograms of cocaine. The ICE wiretap was up for only 6 days and resulted in the identification of 20 Cali cartel members in Miami as well as ledgers accounting for \$56 million in drug proceeds collected in Miami alone during the previous 10 months. The investigation also revealed that the cartel was using another smuggling route involving cocaine hidden in ceramic tiles in container shipments from Panama. This data was passed to Panamanian officials resulting in the seizure of 5,100 kilograms of cocaine in Panama.

- **1993** -- With the arrest of Ackerman, most of the remaining Cali cartel members in South Florida fled the country. Raul Marti, who had been hired by the Cali cartel two weeks prior to Ackerman's arrest, was one of the few to stay behind. Later in the year, Marti was located in Miami driving a vehicle registered to the Tiano Coffee Company. ICE agents, working with border inspectors, began targeting Tiano Coffee shipments entering the United States. In September 1993, more than 5,600 kilograms of cocaine was seized from a Tiano Coffee shipment. By this point, the ICE investigation had led to the seizure of more than 30,000 kilograms of cocaine and the arrest of 30 people, including the cartel's manager in Texas and two successive managers in Miami. The cooperation of many of those arrested helped lay the groundwork for a RICO indictment against the Cali cartel. Due to the success of the ICE case in Miami, the Cali cartel began to route its cocaine loads through Mexico as a transshipment location. Multiple leads developed in the investigation later led to seizure of three maritime cocaine shipments off Mexico totaling more than 17,000 kilograms.
- **1994** -- To corroborate information received from cooperating defendants, ICE obtained, for the first time ever, wiretap orders on pre-paid debit calling cards listing the Cali phone numbers of Miguel Rodriguez-Orejuela as targeted numbers. This led to the acquisition of hundreds of tapes capturing conversations between Miguel Rodriguez and several of his lawyers and managers at the time. To further develop the case, ICE placed an undercover source in close daily contact with the Rodriguez-Orejuela brothers in Colombia. In addition, consensual conversations between Cali attorneys and inmates in U.S. jails were captured in a series of recordings in South Florida. These efforts led to the unprecedented execution of six search warrants at six law firms in the United States in Sept. 1994.
- **1995** -- In June 1995, a federal grand jury in Miami issued the first RICO indictment against the Cali cartel, charging 59 defendants. The defendants included the four Cali kingpins, Miguel Rodriguez-Orejuela, Gilberto Rodriguez-Orejuela, Jose Santacruz-Londono and Helmer Herrera-Buitrago, as well as 9 managers, 10 lawyers and several hit men. The indictment charged the Cali cartel with the importation of 200,000 kilograms of cocaine and the laundering of \$2 billion dollars from 1983 through 1995. Cali kingpins Gilberto and Miguel Rodriguez-Orejuela were apprehended and jailed in Colombia in 1995. Santacruz-Londono and Herrera-Buitrago were later killed.
- **1996** -- In June 1996, a grand jury in Miami indicted 39 additional Cali cartel members. The indictments focused on Colombian businesses where drug proceeds had been laundered. In late 1996, the Cali kingpins reached an agreement with the Colombian government to plead guilty to mirrored charges in Colombia, rather than face future possible extradition to the United States. The Rodriguez-Orejuela brothers pleaded guilty to drug exportation charges in Colombia and remained jailed.
- **1996-1999** -- ICE agents on the case spent much of their time working on and testifying in the Cali cartel RICO trials in the United States. In 1997, Colombia enacted legislation stating that persons accused of narcotics trafficking offenses prior to December 1997 were not subject to extradition.
- **1999-2002** -- In 1999, ICE agents received initial information that the Cali Cartel was continuing its drug and money laundering activities from within Colombian prisons. ICE agents launched a new investigation and developed additional and corroborating information linking the cartel to several seizures in Miami, Texas, and California.
- **2003** -- In September 2003, a federal grand jury in Miami issued a sealed indictment against 11 Cali cartel defendants, including Cali cartel founders Gilberto and Miguel Rodriguez-Orejuela, for recent

drug and money laundering activity. This indictment was superseded in January 2004, with more than \$2 billion in assets being sought as part of the Southern District of Florida forfeiture counts.

- **2004** -- In November 2004, U.S. extradition requests for Giberto Rodriguez-Orejuela and one other defendant in custody were approved by Colombia. Extradition requests for Miguel Rodriguez-Orejuela and two other defendants are being considered before the Colombian Supreme Court.

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